

## HARE JĀTAKA

The major part of the jātakas and legends about Buddha and Bodhisattvas included in the Buddhist Canon, Kanjur and Tanjur have originated from the rich Indian folklore, epos, fairy-tales, and myths. However, making ordinary legends into biographies and jātakas no doubt contemplated certain alterations and treatments. Almost every work of literature usually has both positive and negative characters. While altering, attempt is made to replace positive characters by Buddha and Bodhisattvas and negative ones by evil ghosts or harmful enemies. Here comes an example of the altered folk legend about a moon hare from a Bodhisattva jātaka. Out of the 52 names given to the moon enlisted in the well-known Tibetan Dictionary of Allegorical Expressions *Mkhas-pahi-rna-rgyan* 'Ear-Adornment of Sages' we come across a name *ri-boñ-can* 'with hare' which is explained as follows: "Delighted that the hare had sacrificed its own body, Hurmusta 'Indra' brought it to Heaven for display to the inhabitants of Heaven and then imprinted his image on the moon for people to see it".

Rinchin Nomtoev, a Buriat scientist writes in his outstanding Tibetan-Mongolian Dictionary (Vol. II p. 910): "in ancient times when our Lord studied the deeds of Bodhisattva he sacrificed his body in the image of a hare. It is said that its skin had been hung on the moon in front of the palace gates for all laymen to see it. That's why the moon is named 'with hare'."

These explanations draw us to the conclusion that the moon was named "with hare" (Sanskrit *śaśin*) after the jātaka about the Bodhisattva who had sacrificed his own body appeared. Unlike Buddhist jātakas, however, the name of the moon has come down from the most ancient legends. The first one is about a moon hare spread out in ancient times not only throughout Asia but in distant America. Obviously, there was another legend about a generous and good-natured hare. As enrichment of these above-mentioned two legends, apparently, a third Buddhist jātaka appeared which deals with a generous earth hare who moved to the moon.

To prove this version we shall go through some fairy-tales and legends of peoples over the world.

A very famous legend in the Eastern aimaks of Mongolia says: There lives a lonely hare on the moon and on the earth doe-hares only. Looking at the moon-hare they become pregnant. In Mongolian Gobi aimak people tell



stories about a moon-hare too. There is a legend in the Bulgan aimak about a boy who carried water pails on the moon. Once the moon captured a boy who carried water pails at night. Ever since his image emerged reflected on the moon. That is the reason why people do not appreciate children go for water in the moonlight at night. But if they do go they are warned: "Hurry up! The dog is alarming."

Jukey, an old man who had come from Horchin, Inner Mongolia after the World War II says: "My countrymen tell that there is a tree on the moon. And under the tree a hare is extracting drugs".

Chinese also have a legend about a moon-hare. Here is a short story taken from the tale "shooting the moon" told by Yao tribesmen from "Selection of Chinese Folk Tales", released in Peking in 1958.

Once upon a time there was no sun, no moon and no stars in the sky, but only darkness. One day a bright moon rose up. The moon was not quadrangular, nor round but many-sided. It was emitting tremendously heating rays, burning harvests and it became impossible for people to live below. People slept only after sunset, sweating and yelling they turned to the sky with request: "Oh, Heaven! We no longer need such a burning moon. We shall die soon from thirst". In those times there lived a young couple at the foot of the high mountain. The husband called Yalla was an excellent marksman. And he used to hunt in the mountains. His wife wove precious cloth at home. One day Ni E said to her husband: "The moon brings a lot of misfortunes to people, so why not save people and animals from disaster, striking it with an arrow and knocking it down." Yalla took his arrow and bow and climbed the southern mountain. There he shot many times, with all his might, but they would not reach it. He shot even thousand times and never could he hit the mark. Now he had no more arrows. The ardent moon above was burning almost all people and animals. Yalla took a deep breath and, all of a sudden, the northern mountain broke apart, and out of the gap came up a long-white-bearded old man and said: "There is a tiger on the south and a deer on the north mountains. If you manage to kill them and eat their meat, you will become strong. When you make a bow of tiger tail and a bow-string of its tendon and an arrow of deer horn everything will come all right. With these words the old man disappeared in the hole of the rock. On returning home Yalla told the whole story to his wife. Ni E said: "So go hunting for a tiger and a deer. Are not you a good hunter?" "Once I tried to shoot a tiger and deer. But their skins are so hard that an arrow won't pierce through," replied Yalla. "I can only

catch them with a huge net". So his wife loosened her plait and had her hair cut. Within 30 days they knit a big net. Then Yalla set off to the southern mountain and caught a tiger and a deer on the northern. He ate their meat and became strong. After that he made a new bow and arrow. He climbed the northern mountain and shot the arrow at the moon. It smashed the sides of the moon into smithereens and they turned into stars in the sky, and the moon itself became round-shaped. But its rays continued burning mercilessly as before. Yalla returned home disappointed and said to his wife: "The moon won't stop burning. Let's cover it up with something." At this moment his wife was just knitting a blanket with their family picture on it. On the picture there were high trees in front of the nice house, a herd of sheep and a hare nearby, under the tree stood Ni E herself. She had not yet put Yalla's picture. As her husband was demanding it to cover the moon up she obeyed saying: "Do, as you like. You can take the blanket". Yalla hurried to the northern mountain immediately and shot the arrow with the blanket on it. It hit the mark. The moon was covered up and the heat eliminated. Ever since it remained there unchanged. People got happy and joyful. And then Yalla looked at the moon and he could see clearly the whole picture—the trees, sheep, a hare and Ni E. The moon Ni E was calling the earth Ni E and the latter flying slowly through the air, merged with the first one. Finding himself at a loss he exclaimed: "Why did Ni E forget to put my picture? What shall I do?" Ni E was worrying on the moon too. She had plaited her hair and when the moon was just passing beneath the peak of the mountain, she hung it down. Having caught the lower tip of Ni E's plait Yalla went up to the moon and joined luckily his wife. They still live there: Ni E knitting and Yalla pasturing the sheep and a hare.

This tale was written down from the story Sho Gan-Yu told and then translated from the above-mentioned book by Huhe for my use.

It differs from those we have spoken about. Nevertheless, they have a hare on the moon in common.

There is a popular legend spread all over China about a girl called Chan E who ascended the moon together with a hare and both live there since. Once I happened to read a Japanese tale about a moon-hare translated into Russian, but I failed to find it again.

R. Kinjalov, a Soviet historian and A. Belov, a Soviet writer have studied primitive-age mythology of Mexican Aztecs.<sup>1</sup> Aztecs have created plenty of interesting myths. Their roots go to a remote past when primitive man through his imagination tried to grasp the natural phenomena of his environment. Take



for instance what Aztecs thought about the origin of the sun and the moon.

Towards the end of the Fourth Age, that is, after Flood all Gods gathered in Teotihuacan to settle the problem how to give light to the people. It was concluded that one of them should have himself sacrificed.

Two Gods, a well-to-do Tekukistekatl and a poor Ranauantsin made up their minds to sacrifice themselves to bring light to the people. They kept a fast for four days long, getting ready for offering. A huge fire was constructed for the two to jump into.

The rich Tekukistekatl came up to the fire three times but lacked the courage to jump. So Ranauantsin rushed bravely to the flames and appeared immediately in the image of a twinkling sun. At its sight, dishonoured Tekukistekatl also fell into the fire but, as it had become weaker, he changed into the moon.

Getting angry with the coward Tekukistekatl, the Gods threw him a hare. Since that time he came to live on the moon. The Aztecs used to see a hare in the moon-spot. One Aztec manuscript carries its picture.

It is supposed that American Indians had moved from North East Asia through Alaska thousands of years ago. It seems probable that leaving Asia for America they had brought an Asian legend about a moon hare. It is still more likely that in ancient times Indian legends about a moon-hare and a generous earth-hare spread out. We can find legends alike in the pre-Buddhist period.

Legends about a moon-hare penetrated all over India and, consequently the moon was called "with hare". Afterwards this name was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan and became one of the allegoric names of the moon. In this way the legend seems to have become a Buddhist jātaka of a hare-Bodhisattva.

Chapter 6 of the "34 Buddhist Jātakas" by Ārya Śūra included in the volume 179 of the Mongolian Tanjur is considered a jātaka about a hare. Its context is as follows:<sup>2</sup>

Once upon a time there lived a Bodhisattva in the image of a hare in the woods. Its neighbour friends were an otter, jackal and monkey. They led their lives in the most friendly way.

So one day they all came to His Holiness' place to hear his sermon about the holy ordinance and sat down around him respectfully. Glancing at the

moon the Bodhisattva turned to his friends: "The moon is smiling with its full face as though it was informing those generous about the poṣadha holiday. It means tomorrow is the 15th-moon-day. Therefore you must obey properly the rules relating to poṣadha holiday, that is, to honour the guest with sweetest food and after that you can satisfy your own needs". "Let it be so!" exclaimed his friends and each of them went away to his lodging. As soon as they disappeared the hare was lost in his thoughts: "In case a guest visits us everybody but me has a good chance to honour him, whatsoever, my state of affairs is rather bad. I can't offer him my food-grass which is so bitter for him. Immersed deep in his thoughts, suddenly, a brilliant idea struck him: "The possession that will enable me to honour my guest is so easy to get, it is in my power: I have my own body!" As if appreciating his decision the earth shook, moreover, mountains quaked and untrembled was its garment—the giant ocean, tremendous kettle-drums were heard in the air, and the horizon dazzled with bright shining colour.

When Śakra, the Lord of Gods, learnt about the hare his heart was filled with surprise and curiosity. Anxious to test his real intentions, Śakra changed into a Brahmin priest pretending as if he had lost his way, exhausted by hunger and thirst, and crying he began to call for help. So the otter hurried willingly and brought some fish. The jackal also got some food he could afford. The monkey ran up bringing mango fruit. Soon the hare came up and invited the Brahmin to his place offering his own body as food. To this Śakra said: "How can a man like me kill a living creature". The hare replied: "Indeed, what you have said is very much like a man determined to face suffering. Whatever it be, be here until I get something to please you". Śakra guessed his intention and with his divine strength created a huge pile of smokeless coal. Feeling happy His Holiness let himself fall into the fire. When Śakra saw the happening he was shocked and surprised and converted himself into his real nature, honoured the hare with words pleasant to feel and hear. Then he lifted him up to show him to the Gods. Later, he decorated the moon face with the hare picture to perpetuate such a fearless deed. Ever since, the moon is known as *Śaśāṅka* (i.e. 'with hare mark').

This jātaka reminds us of the legends spread out in Asia, particularly the legend of American Aztecs. It also proves the fact that there was a similar legend in ancient India.

Vol. 180 of the Mongolian Tanjur contains "35 Buddhist Jātakas" written by Sengeshabrin (Haribhaṭṭa) in the way Ārya Śūra did in his "34 Buddhist Jātakas".

<sup>1</sup> R. Kinjalov & A. Belov, *Collapse of Tenschtillak*, Leningrad, 1956, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Translation of the jātaka is from Ārya Śūra, *Girlyanda Jatak*, Moscow, 1962, p. 617.



A hare jātaka is included in chapter 4 of this book (p. 22). Somehow, it is a little bit different from that which Ārya Śūra wrote. Here it is a little shortened: Once there lived happily a hare-Bodhisattva and a hermit. One day a draught came bringing misfortune. They were unable to gather berries and fruits. The hermit had to wander in search of food. Having learnt it, the hare tried to persuade him: "Wait a bit and be patient. I shall get you something to eat today".

He was searching all the night but failed to get anything. He did not even eat grass nor drink water aware of the hunger the hermit was suffering. The hare found nothing and came back empty-handed on the next day, and said: "My Hermit Great! Be a bit patient. I'll place in front of you what I have brought". He ran out and was about to jump into the burning fire when, all of a sudden, the rain poured blossoming flowers, berries and fruits. When the hermit came out to extinguish the fire he could see blossomed flowers and berries and a hare standing right in the middle of lotuses. Thence they came to live happily feeding on berries.<sup>3</sup>

In this instance the hare did not die in the fire neither was he transported to the moon. By this fact we come to know that, besides, the legends about the moon-hare, at the same time, there were legends about the generous earth-hare. Chinese Tripiṭaka also has a jātaka about a hare. In this variant the hare did not die in the fire though he had been in it, neither did he move to the moon. In this respect it is more like the "35 jātakas" by Sengeshabrin (Haribhaṭṭa), however, there is still a slight difference. Here I present this jātaka about a hare from vol. 6 of the Chinese Tripiṭaka to have a clear picture and to see the difference.<sup>4</sup>

There lived a 120-year old Brahmin priest vigilating the outer world and feeding with berries on the mountain. Suddenly he noticed the berries disappear. On the same mountain lived a fox, an otter, a monkey and a hare, who respectfully abided by his preaching. They said: "The berries on the mountain are vanishing. If the Brahmin goes away somewhere we shall lose a chance to listen to his preaching. So we have to provide him with food and he won't leave us. They agreed upon it. The monkey brought some berries, the fox a sack of grains, the otter a big fish. The hare had nothing to offer; so he thought: "I shall sacrifice myself. Though I am small, it will be sufficient

<sup>3</sup> Eighth jātaka from *Pagsam thishin* after Suba. Indra is considered a short story of the mentioned jātaka (Mongolian Tanjur, vol. 181, p. 51). This is also included in the Mongolian Tanjur, Vinaya, vol. 3, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> From E. Chavannes, *Cinq cents contes et apologues extraits du Tripiṭaka chinois et traduit en Français*, Paris, 1911, vol. I, p. 75.

for one day," and jumped into the fire. Fortunately, by his virtues he remained alive. The Brahmin felt sorry for him and decided to stay.

In general this jātaka about a hare from the Chinese Tripiṭaka is almost similar to those in the Mongolian Tanjur, however, they do not wholly coincide so far. For instance, the hare from the "34 jātakas" by Ārya Śūra in the Mongolian Tanjur dies in the fire and is transported to the moon, unlike the hare from the Chinese Tripiṭaka and Sengeshabrin's (Haribhaṭṭa's) jātakas, don't die nor do they move to the moon. Sengeshabrin's hare alone helps the hermit, whereas the hare from the Chinese Tripiṭaka helps the hermit together with his three friends. So far they are not the same as far as the details are concerned. These differences between the Mongolian and Chinese Tripiṭakas are certainly brought about not by the fault of the translators. Naturally, the faithful religious translators were not willing to make arbitrary alterations in Buddhist works. Consequently, these differences prove the fact that Sanskrit originals themselves had variants of jātakas about a hare. As a rule, they stick to the Sanskrit originals precisely.

Judging by this, we may suppose that different interpretations of the legends about a hare used by different authors in inventing Buddhist jātakas facilitated different treatments.

The existence of such legends in the pre-Buddhist period is another proof that Śākyamuni used to speak about them as his past and not as his present life.

Apparently, in India other legends relating to the moon and the hare existed. In the Mongolian Tanjur vol. 181, p. 453 a phrase is found which says that the hare was daydreaming about the moon. The hare's affection towards his beloved is described: "the heart (is longing for her) like ducks for a transparent lake, a hare for the precious moon, like Amur arrow for maids, and bees for a blossomed lotus". Thus another legend is found in India about the affection of the hare towards the moon.

In conclusion, we may well suppose that the legends about a generous hare reflected on the moon, spread out all over Asia and America do not originally come down from Buddhist jātakas, but on the contrary, different jātakas about a hare have originated from different interpretations of legends which became well-known throughout Asia.

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